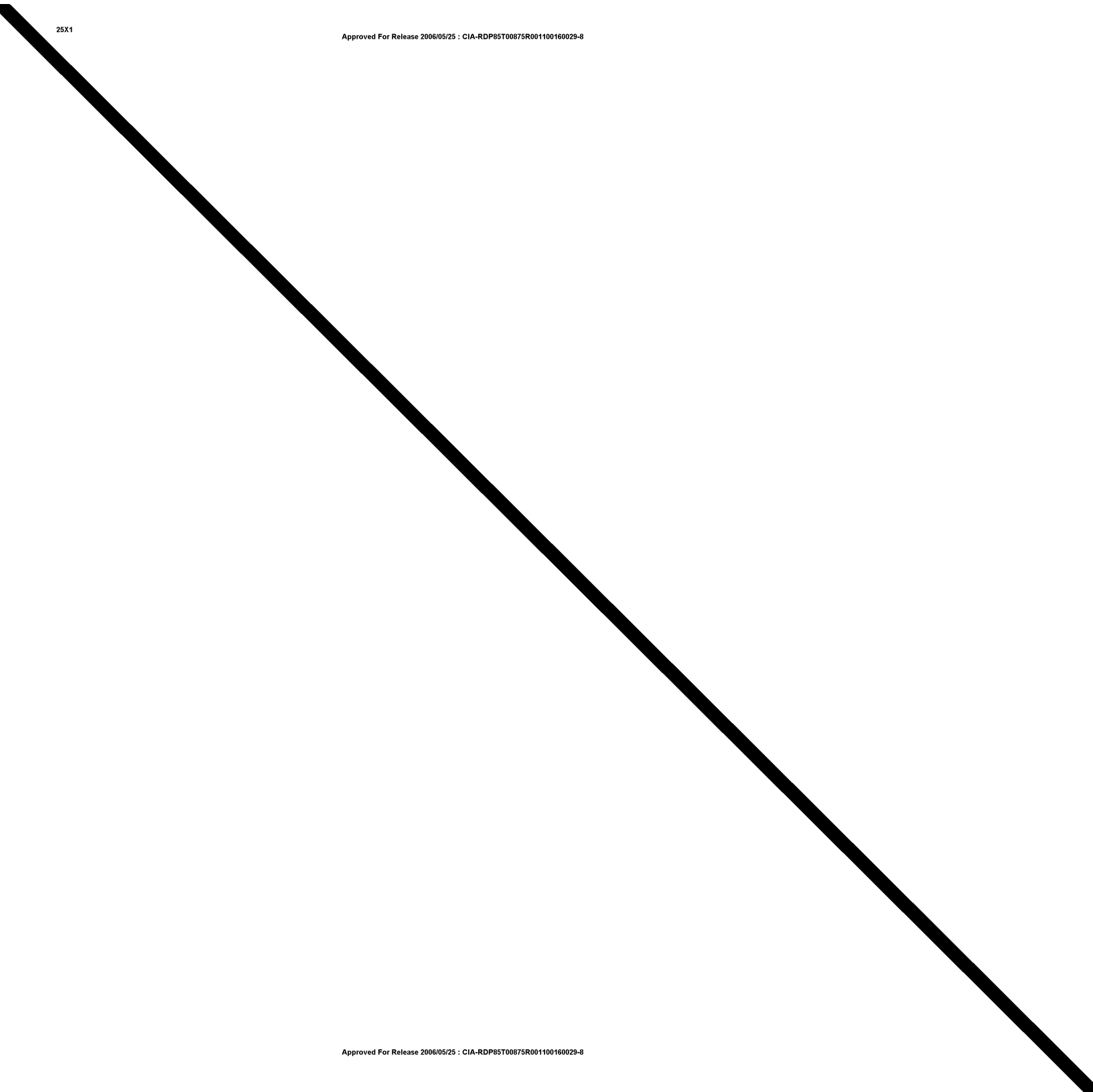

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DIRECTORATE OF
INTELLIGENCE

Intelligence Memorandum

Thieu Strengthens His Position for the Cease-fire Period

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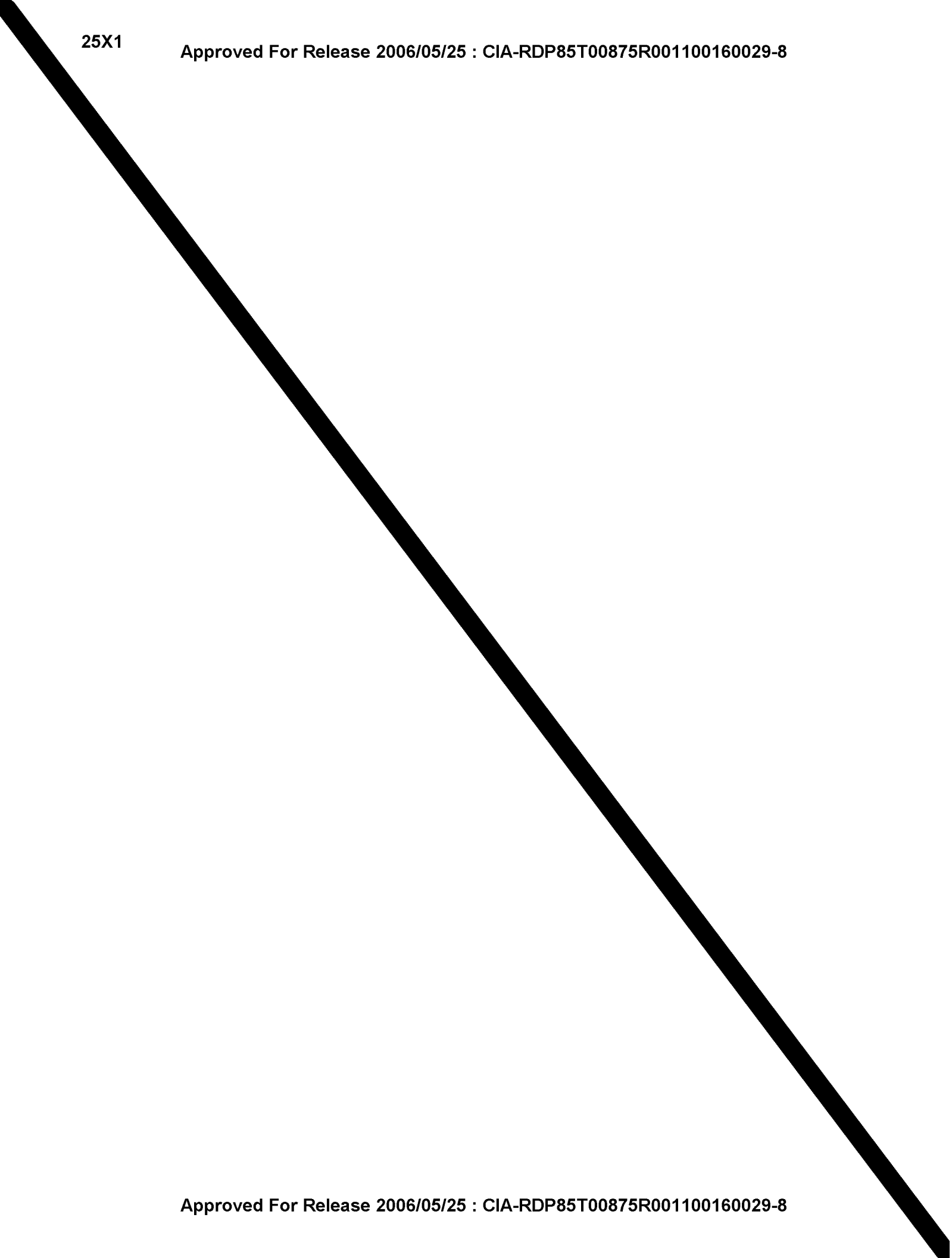

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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
Directorate of Intelligence
31 January 1973

INTELLIGENCE MEMORANDUM

Thieu Strengthens His Position for the Cease-fire Period

Introduction

The agreement on a cease-fire has once again brought to the surface a chronic underlying problem in South Vietnam: the lack of unity among the country's non-Communist political forces. For years South Vietnamese groups have paid lip service to the need for greater political unity to meet the Communist threat, but numerous attempts at cooperation have collapsed because rival politicians could not work together. Now, many South Vietnamese are concerned that, with the fighting ending, the discipline and cohesion of the Viet Cong will provide it with a formidable organizational advantage over the badly factionalized non-Communists in the ensuing political struggle.

Just before his emergency powers expired in late December, President Thieu issued a decree designed to force competing political parties and groups to coalesce or go out of business. The measure requires each to meet stiff new conditions in order to participate openly as a formal political entity in the political system. Many parties are not expected to be able to meet the requirements. Thieu justified his action by asserting that unity is needed quickly if the government is to be ready for the political conflict with the Communists. Some political leaders outside the government have charged that Thieu is merely trying to enhance his own power by eliminating competition and setting up an authoritarian one-party system. Thieu's methods could, moreover, backfire and benefit the Communists by alienating potential backers of the government. Nonetheless, as a result of Thieu's decree and the approaching cease-fire, several groups now appear to be making genuine efforts to broaden their support and to form new alliances. The outcome of their efforts will play a significant role in the over-all course of South Vietnamese politics in the months ahead.

Note: This memorandum was prepared by the Office of Current Intelligence and coordinated with the Office of National Estimates and the Special Assistant for Vietnamese Affairs.

The Nature of the System

Although South Vietnam's political system has many of the trappings of a Western-style democracy, there is little similarity in the way its institutions and forces interact with one another in the daily give and take. The 1967 Constitution, which was adopted under US prodding after a four-year period of coups and political instability, provides for a presidential system and a separation of powers, but in practice, institutions such as the National Assembly and the Supreme Court have never had the stature or influence that their counterparts in most Western countries enjoy. Although Thieu has occasionally come in for sharp criticism from opposition elements in the Assembly, he has almost always been able to get his way. Until two years ago the Supreme Court also at times demonstrated an independence from the executive, but since then the Court has been consistently responsive to Thieu's wishes.

Prior to Thieu's promulgation of the 1972 decree on political parties, some 20 legal parties and many more unofficial factions and interest groups were in existence. Although several parties are well organized down to the local level in scattered parts of the country, most are small cliques of politicians with little or no strength outside of Saigon. The major Buddhist and Catholic religious groups are much stronger political forces than the parties, but even their influence is confined to specific sections of the country. The Catholics have considerable power in some of the urban areas, while the An Quang Buddhists—the only politically significant Buddhist organization—are strong mainly in the northern provinces. The country's major labor union claims a national organization, but its strength is confined largely to a few areas of the country.

Aside from the Viet Cong, the military establishment has been the principal disciplined force organized on a nationwide basis in South Vietnam. In addition to regular troops, there are local territorial forces and militia units throughout the country. Military officers exercise civil functions down to the district level, and, in effect, they—along with the local civilian bureaucracy—run the country. There are also elected officials at the provincial and the village level who are basically loyal to the constitutional system. They have only limited authority and represent various political viewpoints, but they do offer a link between the appointed bureaucracy and the will of the local citizens.

The South Vietnamese people, particularly those in the rural areas where a majority of the people live, are still relatively unsophisticated politically. Exposure to radio, television, and the press has made some

people—largely in urban areas—more familiar with their government and such institutions as national elections. Most, however, are concerned primarily about local security and local political and economic issues. Although they are aware of President Thieu and their central government, they seem to be relatively remote from and to take little interest in national politics or in political figures in Saigon. For this reason, it is somewhat artificial to talk about the popularity of the country's leaders, particularly as reflected in elections. When voting, many South Vietnamese apparently still take advice or orders from individuals whom they respect or fear—village or hamlet authorities, other village elders, or local religious leaders.

Thieu's Political Strategy

Since he was first elected in 1967, President Thieu has shown considerable political skill in consolidating his position and eliminating his rivals. His primary aim has been to tighten his hold on the reins of power, even at the expense of democratic appearances. During his re-election campaign in 1971, the tactics he adopted to ensure victory led both of his opponents to withdraw and to complain that the contest was rigged. The President and his lieutenants have paid lip-service to the need for broadening the government and, as a gesture to US sensitivities, they have on occasion engaged in half-hearted but short-lived coalitions with various political leaders. Thieu has consistently demonstrated, however, that he distrusts these politicians and feels they do not have enough influence or support to warrant his giving them a substantive role in the government.

As a military man, Thieu shows a clear preference for working with his fellow officers rather than with politicians. The military and US backing have been the government's key pillars of support. Thieu has given priority to ensuring the loyalty of the high command through promotions and appointments to top positions.

Recognizing that the Communists were drawing their greatest strength from rural areas, Thieu has tried to go beyond both the narrow circle of Saigon politicians and the more reliable military establishment to develop support in the countryside. At one time, he fostered the election of hamlet chiefs and village and provincial councils. Although these officials have never been given much power compared to appointed military province and district chiefs, Thieu has made a serious effort to give them administrative guidance and training, and to gain their support, apparently because they are closer to the people than national legislators or other Saigon politicians. In the interest of increasing Saigon's control over the local bureaucracy, however, this effort was undercut to some extent by a decree issued last summer. The government ended the election of hamlet chiefs, and began appointing these officials as well as technical personnel in villages and hamlets, ostensibly to forestall Viet Cong inroads at this level.

With the US withdrawing from Vietnam, there are indications that Thieu may further revise the system. He is aware of authoritarian trends in the governments of other US allies in the Far East, and there are indications that he is impressed by the recent actions of leaders in the Philippines, South Korea, and Thailand. For his part, Thieu began taking measures last spring to strengthen his control, particularly when the fighting is over. First, he obtained emergency powers from the National Assembly to rule by decree for a six-month period. With this authority, he moved to tighten security and to clamp down on opposition activities. Among the 60 decrees he issued, those provoking the greatest furor in anti-government circles have been two measures restricting the opposition press and political parties. Rumors have circulated that Thieu intends to try to amend the constitution to weaken the legislature and the judiciary and strengthen the executive arm. Thieu and his lieutenants believe that some of these measures are already working and that taken as a whole, they will substantially enhance the performance of the government after the cease-fire.

In contrast to the decrees aimed chiefly at tightening his control, a number of actions Thieu has taken during his years in office have improved the government's standing with the people. Under the land reform program begun in 1970, the government has authorized the transfer of about 2.3 million acres, and has already granted nearly 600,000 new land titles. Economic measures have had some effect in curbing price increases. The annual rate of inflation has been held to less than 25 percent during the past two years, compared to a rate of 30-55 percent during the 1965-70 period. Local security is also better in many areas than it was in the late 1960s. In addition, Thieu's hard line on the peace issue and his recent defiance of the US have been well received in some circles.

The Democracy Party

An important ingredient of Thieu's effort to strengthen his political position has been the development of a government political party—the Democracy Party. Organizational work for the party began slowly and on a limited basis immediately after the presidential election in late 1971. The effort has taken on a new urgency in recent months as prospects for an early peace agreement increased. Provincial chapters of the party began to hold public inaugural ceremonies last month, and a national convention is tentatively slated for February.

In line with Thieu's long-standing predilections, the Democracy Party represents an attempt to strengthen the government's base by working through groups already largely in the government camp, rather than by trying to bring new elements into the fold. Presidential aides have made a

few overtures to leaders of other parties, but the aides have done little more than suggest that the parties disband and bring their followers into the Democracy Party. Recruiters have concentrated instead on signing up military officers and members of the bureaucracy, as well as elected officials, down to the local level. The party will have two branches: an overt public wing and, because the constitution bars members of the military from open political activity, a secret, controlling wing that will be composed of military officers and key presidential aides. Province chiefs, all of whom are military officers, are in charge of the party chapters in their areas.

Some of the recent decrees that are supposed to help the government compete with the Communists during the cease-fire period directly benefit the Democracy Party. Under the measure providing for the appointment of hamlet chiefs, some loyal members of Thieu's party apparently have replaced members of other parties. The decree on parties may force much of the government's non-Communist opposition to go out of business, or at least to go underground. One independent politician has remarked that the President seems quite unconcerned by the prospect that the Democracy Party might be the only party to survive under the new decree.

On the other hand, Democracy Party organizers have achieved only mixed success so far. Many bureaucrats and elected officials, as well as much of the military high command, have joined, but some have refused. Several senior commanders reportedly have rejected overtures from the party because they believe the military should not engage in partisan politics. Many people who have signed up are said to have done so mainly to avoid harassment or to advance their careers; their commitment to the party is likely to be only skin-deep. Parties that have lost cadres to the Democracy Party are disturbed by its heavy-handed recruiting methods, and some groups are concerned over similarities between the Democracy Party and the late President Diem's Can Lao Party. (The chief job of the Can Lao, which was a nationwide clandestine network of cadres held together largely by fear and greed, was to spy on the political opposition. Its members gained substantial political or economic benefit from their affiliation.)

The Democracy Party will doubtless prosper as long as Thieu remains in power, but it is unlikely that the party would survive for long if Thieu ceased to be head of the government. Some potential party members may now be withholding their support because the peace agreement has cast doubt on Thieu's staying power. The party could, in time, itself cause problems for Thieu if it fails to avoid the pitfalls of the Can Lao and if its critics remain alienated. In a political competition with the Communists, however, a mechanism to mobilize the government's organizational strength would seem helpful, if not essential.

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Response of Other Political Forces

Thieu's appeals for unity to meet a Communist political threat have struck a responsive chord among most independent and opposition groups, despite their obvious dislike for some of his tactics. Fearing the Communists and concerned over the conditions of the cease-fire agreement, most of these groups would like to join effective coalitions, either under the government banner or on their own, so as to increase their political strength. It is uncertain, however, whether the pressures of a peace agreement and the Communist specter will be enough to overcome the internal rivalries and ideological differences that prevail in most of the country's political forces.

The An Quang Buddhists, the dominant political force among the country's majority religious group, are the only influential organized opposition to the Thieu government. During the past few years, the An Quang movement has considerably moderated its former militant anti-government position. It participated in National Assembly elections for the first time in 1970 and elected strong minority blocs of senators and deputies then and in 1971. During this period, the Buddhists began to be more critical of the Communists. The Communist offensive last year, which threatened the main area of Buddhist strength in the northern provinces, increased their misgivings.

As the Buddhists look at the cease-fire, they see the Communists as the greater threat to their position. But they still have little liking for President Thieu and have been angered by some of his recent curbs on opposition activities. Some An Quang leaders, for example, suspect that a requirement in the political parties decree that all candidates for national office be backed by a legal party is aimed at Buddhist legislators, who have no party of their own.

The Buddhists are taking new actions that could trigger a clash with the government, something they certainly would like to avoid. Although there is no indication that they plan to form a formal political party, Buddhists holding elective offices have been meeting to discuss ways to strengthen their organization in the countryside, and the An Quang is becoming concerned about possible government harassment. The Buddhists are also trying to draw up a documented list of their followers who, they believe, are being "illegally" detained by the government, apparently in hopes of obtaining the release of these men.

An Quang leaders are divided over how to react toward Thieu. Some would welcome a change of government, but others would be willing to cooperate with the President if he agreed to act on some of their long-standing grievances. During the cease-fire period, the Buddhists may be

faced with a choice between remaining on the sidelines while Thieu and the Viet Cong engage in political competition for control of the country, or giving some aid to the government as the lesser of the two evils.

The Catholics represent only about 10 percent of the South Vietnamese population, but they have enjoyed political strength far greater than their numbers. Until a few years ago, they were a relatively homogeneous group strongly influenced by political advice from their clergy. They have done well in national elections, securing large blocs of seats in the National Assembly. Since the late 1960s, however, their solidarity has begun to break down, and this has cost them some political influence.

Most of the Catholics firmly backed Thieu during his early years in office, but his controversial re-election campaign and his use of the emergency decree powers last year led some influential Catholic political leaders to become sharply critical. Senate Chairman Nguyen Van Huyen, the most prominent Catholic politician, led the unsuccessful effort to deny Thieu his emergency powers and temporarily formed an informal alliance with the Buddhists in the Senate.

Under the cease-fire pressures and the decree on political parties, the Catholics are trying to re-unite. They are one of the few groups to respond positively to the decree. Several Catholic factions that have been informally allied are now trying to form a party that meets the new legal requirements. The group hopes eventually to join forces with non-Catholic factions in order to improve its prospects for survival. Some Catholic factions are not participating in the venture, however, and there is still considerable rivalry among individual Catholic politicians. Huyen and his followers have recently been supporting the government on its peace position, but mutual distrust persists, and thus far the Catholics show few signs that they want to rejoin the government camp. Nevertheless, because of their firm anti-Communism, most Catholics would no doubt back the government in any political confrontation with the Viet Cong.

Several other religious and ethnic minority groups with considerable regional strength would also be likely to support the government in a confrontation with the Communists. The Hoa Hao and Cao Dai sects and the Cambodian and Montagnard minorities have been badly split by factionalism, but they too have recently been engaging in some efforts at political unity. Their views have ranged from pro-government to independent positions. Thieu has done little to seek their support; he may take them for granted.

Several of the larger political parties without religious ties, e.g., the labor-backed Farmer-Worker Party and the southern-based Progressive

Nationalist Movement, have significant followings in scattered areas. Some of these parties have cooperated with Thieu in the past and are now angry over the decree on parties that faces them with a choice between ceasing open political activities or joining the government camp. Thieu probably expects that some will adopt the latter course and that the others are too weak to cause him any trouble.

In the Months Ahead

The course of South Vietnamese politics obviously depends on how the terms of the cease-fire agreement work out in practice. If Thieu remains in power with continued US aid and if the Viet Cong prove unable to influence the political processes significantly, the President will be spared any significant threat from his domestic opponents, at least over the short run. Thieu has already proven on numerous occasions that he is adept at outmaneuvering the opposition, and the recent measures to tighten his control could help in this respect. Local security conditions and the state of the economy will remain the determining factors in the people's view of the government.

The Communists are giving a high priority to efforts to influence and infiltrate disaffected South Vietnamese groups. Even before the cease-fire they were in contact with An Quang Buddhist leaders—and doubtless with other groups as well. The Buddhists are showing considerable concern over Viet Cong infiltration of their ranks. Past experience suggests that Communist cadres probably have been able to penetrate the Buddhists and other groups, but the extent of their influence will not become clear for some time.

Recent Viet Cong propaganda stressing themes of reconciliation and unity among South Vietnamese of all political shades suggests that the Communists are giving thought to ways of appealing to disaffected groups and neutralists. The Viet Cong had already aroused some interest with its earlier talk of a tripartite coalition, and it may now hope to use the staffing of the new Councils of Reconciliation and Concord as a vehicle to approach such groups.

The measures curbing opposition activity, if enforced to the letter, could eliminate any middle ground between the government side and the Communists, leaving the opposition with no outlet within the system for its political energies. In this case, some groups might become so frustrated that they would revert to more extreme tactics, such as disruptive demonstrations. Such a situation would make them a better target for Communist recruiters. Moreover, if the Communists seemed to be gaining the upper hand, pressures would increase on opposition groups for an accommodation with the Viet Cong.

If Thieu is put in a position where he is forced to look for more support, he will have to change his ways and give outsiders a meaningful role in a broadened regime. His most significant concessions would be to the An Quang Buddhists. The strong anti-Communist sentiment within most of the country's political groups make them receptive to a serious proposal. In the past, Thieu has never been inclined to share power. He is, however, as sagacious as any Vietnamese when it comes to sensing the direction and nature of compromise needed to preserve political power. If it were clear that his political life and that of his administration depended on the broadening of his regime, it is by no means certain that he would not, or could not, carry it off.